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ABSTRACT

To examine the possible interaction of types of social support variables on individuals' reactions to the supportive intervention and its effects on performance, two studies were conducted. In the first study, 167 college students attempted to solve anagrams following initial failure at five unsolvable anagrams and participation in one of four treatment conditions: distraction, social interaction, social interaction-coping, and coping alone. Subjects also completed the Cognitive Interference Questionnaire (CIQ) and the Survey of Situational Support. An analysis of the results showed that the subjects who were provided with coping skills in a peer discussion setting performed significantly better than those who simply interacted with others or those who were provided with coping skills information alone. In the second study, 113 college students, divided by high and low negative life events (as assessed by the Life Experiences Survey of Sarason, Johnson & Siegel, 1978) and high and low social support (as indicated by the Social Support Questionnaire Satisfaction Score), completed Means Ends Problem Solving stories. Subjects received one of three types of instruction: control, support, and restricted support. Upon completion of the stories, subjects were administered the CIQ, and rated their performance and experimenter attitudes. An analysis of the results showed individuals who rated themselves as low in social support thought more about social situations or responded less automatically to them than those who rated themselves high in social support. These studies indicate that the performance of individuals who see themselves as high or low in perceived support is differentially affected by supportive interventions. (BL)

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Effects

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Social Support: Experimental Attempts to Understand
its Characteristics and Effects

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Researchers in the area of social support have been aware for some time of the need to look at the concept more analytically. One way of doing this is to define and measure support as it is perceived by an individual. In the past few years a number of scales have been developed for this purpose. Some of the scales break support into areas of need for which help is supplied, others contrast support provided by family members with that from others (see, for example, Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Procidano & Heller, 1983). A still different approach is to separate the amount of support that an individual expects to have available from the degree to which he or she is satisfied with that support (Sarason, Levine, Basham & Sarason, 1983). Another way to study what constitutes socially supportive behavior and its effects is to use experimental manipulation and look at both the subjects' psychological reaction to the supportive intervention and its effects on their performance. This paper reports two studies in which supportive behavior was used as an experimental treatment and self-assessed support as an independent variable in order to allow examination of the possible interaction of types of social support variables.

Experiment One

One hundred sixty-seven undergraduate university students enrolled in introductory psychology were subjects in this experiment which had a 2x2x3 factorial design. There were 4 different experimental treatments categorized in two ways: whether or not they involved social interaction, and whether or not they provided active coping strategies. All the experimental treatments were designed to provide support to the subjects in a number of different ways that have been described in the literature (Cassel, 1974; Cobb, 1976; Heller, 1979; Murray & Jacobsen, 1978). These included distraction, social interaction, social interaction combined with coping information and coping information alone. All subjects first experienced failure by working on 5 unsolvable anagrams. The subjects then completed the Cognitive Interference Questionnaire (CIQ, Sarason & Stoops, 1978) a state measure of cognitive interference. They were then given a five minute intervention that differed depending on their group. The distraction group was required to write an essay on problems related to school. The social interaction group was instructed to discuss topics related to school. The social interaction-coping group was introduced to the concept of test anxiety, given a list of coping strategies to combat it, and asked to discuss them. The coping information group was given the list of coping strategies and the information on test anxiety but did not discuss it. After the treatment condition was

completed, all subjects were given a group of difficult and moderately difficult anagrams to solve. After the anagram task, subjects again filled out a CIQ.

During a prior and unrelated experiment the subjects had completed the Survey of Situational Support (SSS, Sarason, 1982), a measure of social support that is focused on the supportive features of subjects' home, school and social environments. This instrument yields separate scores for satisfaction and number of supports. Subjects were divided at the median into high or low groups on the basis of each of these scores (SSSN or SSSS) as the third factor of the design.

Results

Using the score on the moderate and difficult anagrams as a measure, the ANOVA of this 2x2x2 (SSSN or SSSS measures in separate analyses) design showed a significant interaction for social interaction x coping. The results were $F(1,143)=5.66$, $p<.02$ and $F(1,147)=6.65$, $p<.01$ respectively. Subjects in the distraction condition performed best on the anagrams, followed by subjects in the discussion of coping skills condition. Table 1 gives the means for the four groups. When the subjects were asked to rate how good their performance had been on the anagrams there was a similar interaction between social interaction and coping for both SSSN and SSSS scores [$F(1,147)=4.05$, $p<.05$ and $F(1,143)=4.56$, $p<.03$ respectively]. In both cases the Ss in the group that discussed

ways of coping with test anxiety had the highest perception of their performance. The group in the essay writing distraction condition had the next highest score. There was also a main effect for SSSS on perception of performance [$F(1,143)=3.87, p<.05$]. Subjects who were higher in SSSS also had a more favorable perception of their performance. An analysis of covariance of the second CIQ scores, using the earlier CIQ scores as covariates showed a significant coping by social experience interaction for SSSN score [$F(1,147)=5.72, p<.02$]. Subjects low in support had more non-task thoughts under the coping discussion treatment. Those high in support had more non-task thoughts in the essay condition. Means for the groups are shown in Table 2.

Discussion

The results show clear differences in the impact of the supportive interventions. It can be seen from Table 1 that the Ss who were provided with coping skills in a peer discussion setting performed significantly better than either those who simply interacted by discussing school experiences or those who were provided with the coping skill information but who did not discuss it with others. It appears that the combination of the skill information and the interaction experience was the critical factor. Of interest also is the high level of performance of the distraction group. At least in this task setting, diverting the subject's mind from a previous failure experience, i.e., keeping him or her "busy"

after a stressful experience is the most effective way to improve subsequent performance.

Experiment Two

The subjects in this experiment were 113 undergraduate students in an introductory psychology course. The study used a 2x2x3 factorial design with two levels of life change, two levels of assessed social support and three levels of experimentally provided support. Life change was assessed using the Life Experiences Survey (Sarason, Johnson & Siegel, 1978). Social support was assessed with the Social Support Questionnaire Satisfaction Score (SSQS). The LES and the SSQ were administered to a large group. Subjects with 8 or fewer negative life events were categorized as low in LES score and those with 9 or more negative events as high. Subjects with average scores of 1.80 or less on the SSQS items were considered low SSQS and subjects with scores of 1.81 or greater as high SSQS. Subjects were selected from the original group to fill the four cells represented by high and low LES and high and low SSQS scores. Subjects then completed five Means Ends Problem Solving type stories (Platt & Spivack, 1975) that required them to write the middle of a story for which the beginning and the end were provided. Subjects received one of three types of instructions: control, support, and restricted support. The control instructions merely explained how the task was to be carried out. The support instructions combined reassurance with the offer of help if needed. The restricted

support instructions emphasized that the task should not cause problems and that the subjects should simply do it and turn it in. The support instructions and the restricted support instructions were as follows:

Support . Some of you will feel uneasy about writing stories. Remember you are not the only person who feels this way. Just relax and do your best. Do you have any questions? I'll be available to you throughout your work to answer any more questions that you have. After you are done, please take your stories next door and there will be someone to debrief you and give you any more information that you should want or need.

Restricted Support . Writing stories does not bother most people. We expect you to have no trouble with the task. Just get busy and do your best. You have the instructions now. I will not be able to answer any more questions for you. After you are done, please take your stories next door and there will be someone to debrief you.

After the problem solving task was completed, the Cognitive Interference Questionnaire (Sarason & Stoops, 1978) was administered. Subjects also rated their own MEPS performance and recorded their perceptions of the experimenter's attitude toward them.

Measures used in the analysis of the stories included scores for thinking and initiative. The thinking score was the degree to which a subject described the protagonist as thinking about the problem before initiating action. The initiative score represented the degree to which the protagonist initiated a solution or followed up another's action as opposed to passively accepting a solution or failing to solve the problem.

Results

In the analysis of the data a $2 \times 2 \times 3 \times 2$ ANOVA was used with sex of subject being the added dimension. The ANOVA of the thinking score produced only one significant result, a main effect for assessed social support [$F(1,88)=3.85, p<.05$]. Those in the low SSQS group emphasized thinking to a greater degree than the high SSQS group. The comparable analysis for Initiative produced a significant interaction between assessed and administered social support [$F(2,88)=4.91, p<.01$]. Inspection of the means showed that for the control group, high SSQS subjects had significantly higher Initiative scores than those with low SSQS scores ($p<.05$). Experimentally provided social support was related to higher Initiative scores for low than high SSQS subjects ($p<.01$). The means for this analysis are presented in Table 2. There was also a significant 4 way interaction [$F(2,88)=6.13, p<.01$]. Subjects who were given social support rated their experimenters as significantly

more supportive [$F(2,102)=4.04$, $p<.02$] and pleasant [$F(2,102)=3.662$, $p<.03$] than did subjects in the other groups.

Discussion

These results indicate that the instructions designed to provide social support were perceived as supportive by the subjects. They also suggest that individuals who rate themselves as low in social support think more about social situations or respond less automatically to them than those who rate themselves as high in perceived support. Finally, and perhaps most important the results clearly indicate that the effect of a supportive manipulation does not have the same performance consequences for those high and low in self assessed perceived support.

General Discussion

The studies used two different measures of social support, the Social Support Questionnaire and the Survey of Situational Support. These are related ($r=.60$) but appear to measure somewhat different aspects of the variable. The SSQ asks the subject to consider support in certain situations while the SSS asks the subject to consider certain classes of relationships (friends/work and school/and family). Subjects have the opportunity to include religiosity and other unique sources of support on the SSQ but not on the SSS.

Both experiments demonstrate that individuals differing in self described social support can be affected differently by instructions

designed to give situational support. While these communications may be helpful for those low in self-described support, they may be related to a decrease in performance level for those high in support. In addition to verbally communicated support, another method that may be helpful for those low in support is instructions designed to focus attention on the task.

Giving information about how to deal with worries and concerns during the task does not seem to be uniformly helpful for those high and low in self described support. The results suggest that for those low in support, communication of anxiety-coping strategies may increase the person's level of tension if the information is simply presented in written form. Only if there is an opportunity to discuss the information with peers, does the coping material appear to accomplish its desired function of improving task performance. In some cases instructions that merely distract the subject from a preceding failure experience by providing a task with high attentional demand seems to produce the best level of subsequent performance.

In addition to performance level, the degree of non-task oriented thinking can be altered by supportive instructions, but decrease in off-task thoughts is not necessarily associated with improved performance.

The two experiments reported here indicate that supportive communications are perceived as intended by subjects and that not

all the usually suggested ways of providing support are equally applicable to improving performance, at least on the tasks provided here. Probably most important, the experiments provide further evidence that the performance and the reported thoughts of individuals who see themselves as high or low in perceived support is not always affected in the same way by interventions intended to provide support.

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Table 1. Mean Scores on Anagram Performance for the Social x Coping Task Dimensions with Subjects Divided by Survey of Situational Support Number Score (SSSN)

		Coping	
		Yes	No
Social	<u>Yes</u>	10.23 (44) Coping Skill Group disc.	8.38 (40) Group discussion on School
	<u>No</u>	7.74 (31) Reading about coping skills	11.30 (33) Essay writing on school

Table 2. Covariate Analysis of Mean Number of Distracting Thoughts on TOQ After Solvable Anagram Task (with earlier TOQ Score as Covariate)

		Support N Score	
		Low	High
Coping	<u>Yes</u>	17.03 (31)	14.52 (52)
	<u>No</u>	15.24 (41)	17.41 (32)

**Table 3. Initiative Score Means for Groups Differing in Social Support
Questionnaire Satisfaction (SSQS) Scores and Experimental Social Support (ESS)**

<u>ESS</u>	<u>SSQS</u>	
	<u>High</u>	<u>Low</u>
Support	9.78 (19)	12.80 (19)
Restricted Support	9.74 (21)	10.64 (17)
Control	11.63 (16)	8.70 (20)